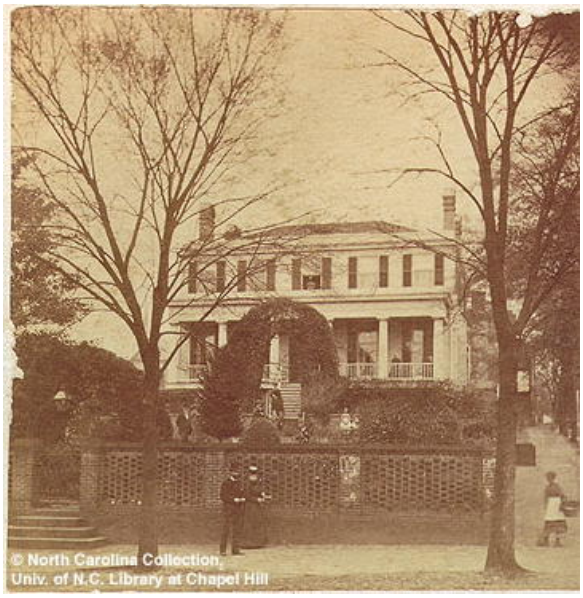
Americans. [7] In 1897, a total of 3,478 African Americans recorded their occupations in the directory. Of those, the two largest categories were washerwomen, butlers, or other domestic houseworkers (1,087) employed by white households and the general laborers (1,326).[8] It is unknown what types of work were most represented by men who reported their occupation as laborer, but laborers generally received low pay, had minimal degrees of job security, and are typically classified as unskilled. These two categories—laborers and domestics—together represented 68 percent of the city's African American employment.



DeRossett House, ca. 1872. Although the image is of the grand house and family, just inside the photo can be seen the family's washerwoman with her basket.
Image: North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

[7] When working towards a classification scheme for grading occupations, most economists have used the standards developed by the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. However, those standards do not easily apply to Wilmington. One example can be seen in the category of unskilled labor, which included stevedores, draymen, and laborers. In Wilmington, many stevedores received higher pay than day-laborers and occupied a higher social status because of their jobs at Sprunt's cotton compress. Further, draymen were self-employed and often owned their wagons and horses, placing their working status above laborers and some stevedores. Additionally, building trades represented a long-standing tradition of carpentry by some of the city's most respected and wealthy African American families. For this study, stevedores, carpenters, and those in maritime and railroad trades were singled out to reflect the specific roles those occupations played in the overall life of the city. Food service workers were singled out to study because they represented an up-and-coming trend in the city and reflected some of the first post-1898 entrepreneurial movements.

[8] Of the 1,018 domestic workers, 971 were employed in jobs such as washerwoman, housemaid, maid and cook—jobs traditionally reserved for African American women who worked for white employers in white homes. There were 511 cooks and 421 washerwomen or laundresses in the 1897 city directory. Oral histories of many African American families are peppered with memories of at least one family member who worked for a white family. The pay was low but afforded a guaranteed income, which helped families when male incomes were either nonexistent or were unstable due to seasonal employment. Other interviewees recalled that it was an important status symbol to work for a prominent, wealthy white family and recalled that employment with pride. The category also includes nurses. It is unknown if the modern interpretation of the occupation of nurse as a trained health service provider is appropriate for all individuals. Alternative interpretation of the term could be that these women provided child- or elder-care services in white homes, implying less educational training and pay. Wilmington did have a hospital at the time, but the composition and number of its staff is unknown. A newspaper account from the day of the violence indicated that the hospital staff was predominately white. For oral histories by Wilmington African Americans, see the Behind the Veil Project at Duke University or the files of the Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.